

# Historical Commentary

by SUE ARMITAGE

## Are We There Yet?

### *Some Thoughts on the Current State of Western Women's History*

**Thirty years ago**, fledgling western women's historians, myself included, confidently launched themselves into researching the historical experiences of women and restoring them to their rightful place in western history. It seemed so easy: all we had to do was to document the overlooked activities of women, and western historians would obligingly add these new stories to their narratives. Thirty years later, we are still waiting. It seems that although the New Western History validated the importance of racial-ethnic and environmental topics, women and gender are still optional add-ons. Women's historians have long puzzled over why this is the case. Fortunately, five recently published books on western women provide me with the opportunity to ruminate publicly on the issue: two of these books are compensatory in the sense that they fill existing gaps in the literature; two offer new perspectives; and the fifth is a valiant effort to put it all together. What follows is not a conventional review. While I try to give an adequate description of each book, I frankly picked the ideas that interested me and tried to follow them where they led.

*Their Own Frontier: Women Intellectuals Re-Visioning the American West* (2008), edited by Shirley Leckie and Nancy Parezo, contains the biographies of ten women historians and anthropologists who worked with and wrote about American Indians in the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Considered in light of the question of women's place in western history, this book makes for sobering reading. Contemporaries mostly ignored these authors, partly because they were female but also because their sympathies so clearly lay with the people they studied. Many important women are considered in this volume, among them Annie Abel, Mari Sandoz, Alice Marriott, Ruth Underhill, and Ella Deloria. The best known of this group is Angie Debo. Leckie's article about Debo shows that her meticulous



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Western women's historians have sought to bring to light the narratives of women's lives, including that of this woman, Alice Pleasant, whose race made her a curiosity in nineteenth-century Montana. Born in 1850, Alice Pleasant (aka Ma Plaz, above) came to Fort Assinniboine with her soldier husband and moved to nearby Havre in the late 1890s when Mr. Pleasant was discharged from the army. She owned the Home Café circa 1910–20. The local Polk directory advertised it as “Home Restaurant, Alice Pleasant propr, Good Meals, Best Quality Home Cooking, Table Supplied with the Best Market Affords, Rates Reasonable.” “Ma Plaz” was regarded as a local character, and it was said that she liked her cigars and “when crossed could speak the English language in words not found in our dictionary.” She died in 1934.

research on the Five Southern Tribes (the groups we used to call the Five Civilized Tribes) in Oklahoma was fueled by her own anger at their treatment and by a palpable disbelief in the standard Turnerian frontier narrative. Writing in the 1930s, when Turner still rode high, Debo had no chance of revising the standard western history narrative. Today we honor her as a forerunner and lament the effect she might have had on western history had she not been denied academic positions and recognition in her lifetime.

Debo's story may be the most dramatic in *Their Own Frontier*, but the theme of dedication to research coupled with academic marginalization runs through

the life of every woman in the volume. Leckie and Parezo point out in their lucid and damning introduction, which ought to be required reading for all western historians, that anthropology, unlike history, needed female anthropologists to interview native women who would not speak to strange men. Leckie and Parezo nonetheless conclude that the path to academic acknowledgment was strewn with the bodies of women who simply could not take the wear and tear of constantly proving that they were as objective and scientific as men. For female historians, the situation was even worse. As the authors explain in some detail, until the affirmative action programs of the 1970s, few women were admitted to the leading history graduate programs, and fewer still achieved important academic positions. In the discipline of history as a whole, women were not considered historical subjects until women's history challenged that omission in the 1970s.

Some skeptics may be inclined to dismiss these authors as "just a bunch of complaining women," but Leckie and Parezo clearly show the value of the overlooked perspectives of these pioneering scholars in American Indian history. The women's historians and female anthropologists struggling for legitimacy in the 1970s could have learned much from this outstanding group of women had their research been widely known and integrated into their fields at the time. By seeking to displace unilinear Turnerian thinking by the concept of a two-sided frontier, Leckie and Parezo assert that they paved the way for today's ethnohistory.

If the women in the first anthology were marginalized, the women in *African American Women Confront the West, 1600–2000* (2003; reprint 2008), edited by Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, were simply invisible. Historians' interest in African Americans in the West dates from the 1970s, but with the exception of a few notable women like "Mammy" Pleasant, the attention of both white and black male historians has been on black men in black communities. There was a textual reason for this male bias: most community histories are based on the official records of schools, churches, and other community organizations, and the officials of most of these groups were men. Women's historians have learned to look beneath the official documents to ask who did the organizing, the fund-

raising, the charitable work: that's where the women who made the men's visible role possible are to be found. In this first-ever anthology on black women in the West, Taylor and Moore gathered articles by nearly twenty authors (including me) to document a four-century history of black women's unofficial community activities in the West. The records for the period before 1900 are sparse, and the full range and importance of women's activities is captured only in twentieth-century oral histories, but the extent of black women's involvement in the western workforce, in anti-discrimination battles, and, above all, in community building is well documented here. Taylor and Moore provide a chronology by piecing out the articles with relevant primary source materials. They also provide a rich introductory narrative that amply supports their contention that western black women acted "with a profound conviction in their own abilities to move beyond the limitations racism and sexism had placed on them."<sup>2</sup>

While providing the basic foundation for African American women's history in the West, this book also supports the positive stereotype of all black women as stalwart workers, mothers, and community builders. That image is not wrong, but no community is monolithic. While the full diversity of black women's experience in the West is evident in several of the studies of the new African American communities of World War II, many of the nineteenth-century studies of exceptional black women do not fully explore the context of discrimination and subordination in which they were forced to work.<sup>3</sup> Without that "reality check," the price of constant daily struggle is undercounted. Two recent articles on Mammy Pleasant and Mary Fields, both in *Portraits of Women in the American West* (2005), edited by Dee Garceau, show what can be done to recover that context and count the real costs.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the voluminous writings on the U.S.-Mexican border, writing on the U.S.-Canadian border is miniscule and, until very recently, all about men. *One Step over the Line: Toward a History of Women in the North American West* (2008), edited by Elizabeth Jameson and Sheila McManus, breaks much new ground as the authors extend their thinking beyond the customary national boundaries.<sup>5</sup> This anthology of sixteen articles by American and Canadian scholars, including me, contributes to transnational



Single women made up a sizeable minority (about 20 percent) of homesteaders in eastern Montana in the early twentieth century. One such woman, German-Russian Rosie Roesler (in the light dress), was photographed with her friends by Evelyn Cameron on August 31, 1913.

and comparative women's history, a rapidly growing field, while also challenging the existing trans-Canadian border scholarship that clings to the old fallacies. Among the topics covered are new definitions of regionalism, the importance of place and nation in women's lives, cross-border migrants, maternalism in white-indigenous contacts, and women's work. As is true of all anthologies opening new territory, the work is more suggestive than definitive, but it provides many interesting topics for us all to pursue further. Transnational comparison can be a powerful tool in women's history because it shifts the focus from the nation to women themselves—not, I hasten to say, that all women are “sisters under the skin” but that nationality itself becomes simply another item of difference rather than a dominant cultural influence. It becomes only one of many factors that shape women's experiences north and south of the border.

*Contact Zones: Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada's Colonial Past* (2005), edited by Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale, represents the most dramatic new direction: the use of gender theory in the study of imperialism and colonialism. Following the pioneering work of anthropologist Ann Stoler, women's historians now are working to show the ways in which gender, sexuality, race, and intimacy are all vital parts of the encounters between indigenous people and colonizers that occurred worldwide.

This book insists that “[w]omen occupied the spaces of colonial encounter between Aboriginals and newcomers as both colonizers and the colonized. . . . Colonial relationships of power were . . . grounded in the materiality of women's day-to-day lives.” The authors of the twelve articles in the volume demonstrate that regulation of the bodies of indigenous women (especially, but not only, their sexuality) was an essential component of the British imperial effort in western Canada. The authors provide detailed examples of the imposition of British gender roles in, for instance, efforts to suppress prostitution (in which all native women were believed to be engaged) and laws about dress, marriage, and appropriate work for indigenous and colonizing women. On the first topic, Jean Barman's essay on native women in Victoria is an eye-opener. Barman concludes that “most indigenous women didn't stand a chance. . . . They were sexually transgressive merely by virtue of the differences that marked them out from newcomer [i.e., white] women.” All of the collection's authors also show how indigenous women resisted. There are no passive victims here. This volume demonstrates that assumptions about gender are central to colonial encounters (also known as frontiers), and this conclusion has immense implications for historians south of the Canadian border. Twenty years after the publication of Patty Limerick's *Legacy of Conquest*, gender

provides a theoretical way to think about the colonization of the American West in ways that encompass women of all races and classes. Historians who think and write about “settler colonialism” may be on the track of bringing together the separate histories of race, class, gender, and environment that have been written in the past twenty years.<sup>6</sup>

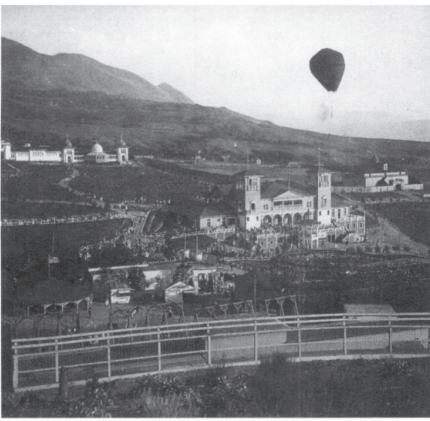
Finally, I want to acknowledge Laura Woodworth-Ney’s new textbook, *Women in the American West* (2008). Woodworth-Ney is the first women’s historian in a generation to attempt a comprehensive history—the last, to my recollection, was Sandra Myres’s *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800–1915*, published in 1982. How the field has changed! Woodworth-Ney has risen to the challenge of doing it all, from pre-contact Native American women to the Dixie Chicks. She has struggled, with some success, to impose order on all of her diverse materials and to place individual women in the wider context of the changing economy and population of the West. In addition to the basic narrative, she has written a historiographic chapter, extensive brief biographies, and comprehensive bibliographies. The range of information makes the book a teacher’s dream, although students likely would disagree. As all textbook writers know, comprehensiveness is the foe of compelling narrative. Nevertheless, thanks to Woodworth-Ney’s thoroughness, no western historian can now leave women out of a lecture, book, or mind and blame the omission on the supposed lack of information about women.<sup>7</sup>

Where does this meandering path through five interesting books lead us? What conclusion can I offer about the current state of western women’s history, western history, or the future of both? That western history is currently fragmented (“exploded,” one friend put it) is unquestionable. That is not necessarily a bad thing. Each of the relatively newer fields, among which I would count racial-ethnic, women’s, environmental, and cultural history, has been able to develop more or less autonomously without much outside pressure to fit into a mainstream version of western history. But maybe it’s time to consciously consider race, class, gender, and place in everything we write. However this union happens, under the rubric of colonialism or some other formulation, gender is integral, not an add-on, as each of these books, in different ways, suggests.

These books also suggest, again in different ways, why the integration of gender has been so slow. Leckie and Parezo are blunt about it: discrimination against women in academic professions and scholarship is to blame, and (although they don’t quite say it openly) male bias has not completely disappeared. Taylor and Moore’s anthology reveals some of the perils of compensatory scholarship: limited sources lead to concentration on exceptional women who then become almost inevitable victims of tokenism. Examples of token efforts abound, not just in the integration of women of color but also in mainstream topics such as suffrage, where a few famous women—Abigail Scott Duniway, May Arkwright Hutton—get frequent mention but the women’s movements that supported them do not. *One Step over the Line* exposes the problem of expanding history beyond national borders to social history, or the study of the everyday lives of ordinary people. Because few western historians (aside from labor historians) jumped on the social history bandwagon of the 1960s and 1970s, western history lacks the strong social base that community studies provided for colonial New England or that close studies of slavery provided for southern historians. Only now are racial ethnic scholars beginning to write the community and case studies within which consideration of gender and women is basic. *Contact Zones* shows how a blending of theory and intimate detail can encompass race, class, and gender, and my personal hope is that western history will move in this direction. As Woodworth-Ney shows, there is no shortage of information about western women and gender. But in the last analysis, historians of gender and western women are dependent on all those other historians who write western environmental, political, and cultural history. Finally, then, I conclude that we’ll “be there” when western historians realize that gender is just too important to overlook.

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18. *St. Louis Republic*, Oct. 23, 1907, p. 2; *New York Times*, Oct. 3, 1911, p. 1.
19. *Columbus Dispatch*, Dec. 15, 1907, p. 11.
20. *Fly*, February 1909, 11.
21. *Louisville (Ky.) Courier Journal*, Nov. 13, 1909, p. 1.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Orville and Wilbur Wright made the world's first airplane flight in 1903 but did not fly publicly again until about 1908, giving them time to secure their patents.
24. *Binghamton (N.Y.) Republican*, Aug. 12, 1911, p. 2.
25. *Aircraft*, September 1911; *Columbus Dispatch*, Oct. 3, 1911, p. 1.
26. "Mrs. Dixon May Ride with Cromwell," *Aero*, June 17, 1911, 242.
27. C. R. Roseberry, *Glenn Curtiss, Pioneer of Flight* (Garden City, N.Y., 1991).
28. *American Magazine of Aeronautics*, May 1911, 188.
29. Curtiss was also responsible for the training of the Signal Corps, which would soon have a small fleet of Curtiss airplanes.
30. Glenn Curtiss and August Post, *The Curtiss Aviation Book* (New York, 1912).
31. *New York Herald*, Aug. 7, 1911, p. 8.
32. *Binghamton (N.Y.) Republican*, Aug. 12, 1911, p. 1.
33. *Helena (Mont.) Independent*, Oct. 1, 1911; Louis S. Casey, *Curtiss, The Hammondsport Era 1907-1915* (New York, 1981), 75-76, 225-27.
34. *Binghamton (N.Y.) Press*, Aug. 12, 1911, p. 1.
35. Wiley, *Montana and the Sky*, 55-56, 49; *Helena (Mont.) Montana Daily Record*, Sept. 29, 1911.
36. *Helena (Mont.) Montana Daily Record*, Sept. 29, 1911.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Spokane (Wash.) Spokesman Review*, Oct. 4, 1911.
40. *Helena (Mont.) Independent*, Oct. 1, 1911, p. 1.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Spokane (Wash.) Spokesman Review*, Oct. 3, 1911, pp. 1, 6.
43. *Ibid.*
44. Annie and Lulu Dixon moved back

to Columbus. Law suits over unpaid debts and financial problems continued to plague Mrs. Dixon. Only one small notice in the *Columbus Dispatch* on May 15, 1913, noted her death.

45. There is only one published biography of Dixon, Martin Kidston's *Cromwell Dixon: A Boy and His Plane, 1892-1911* (Helena, Mont., 2007).

46. *Helena (Mont.) Daily Record*, Oct. 3, 1911; *Spokane (Wash.) Spokesman Review*, Oct. 7, 1911, p. 5; Helena Regional Airport newsletter, Mar. 2009. The monument is on private property just over the top of the old Mullan Pass.

### Celebrating a Century of County Building in Montana

1. For a more detailed account of the homestead boom, see Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, rev. ed. (Seattle, Wash., 1991), 232-53. Montana population figures for 1900 and 1910 are from U.S. Census Bureau figures, <http://ceic.commerce.mt.gov/Demog/historic/MTcensus1890-2000.pdf>. The 1918 estimate is from Montana Department of Agriculture and Publicity, *Resources and Opportunities of Montana, "Land of Opportunity," Edition of 1918* (Helena, Mont., 1918), 6. This agency's annual population estimates are apparently the only ones available for the years in between the federal censuses, yet there is no information about how they were produced and the figures seem rather high.

2. *Laws, Resolutions and Memorials of the State of Montana Passed at the Twelfth Regular Session of the Legislative Assembly* (Helena, Mont., 1911), 205-23, quote from 205. The best source on Montana county-splitting is Dave Walter, "County Busting: Colorful Memories and an Economic Legacy," *Montana Magazine*, 78 (July-Aug., 1986), 49-53. A related article is Dave Walter, "Counties That Might Have Been: Losers in the County-Busting Craze," *Montana Magazine*, 79 (Sept.-Oct. 1987), 31-37.

3. Ellis Waldron and Paul B. Wilson, *Atlas of Montana Elections, 1889-1976* (Missoula, Mont., 1978), 73; Malone, Roeder, and Lang, *Montana*, 252. *Montana: A History of Two Centuries* gives 1915 as the year for the passage of the Leighton Act; the act was actually approved March 6, 1911.

4. For maps of county boundaries at any point in Montana's history, see <http://www.newberry.org/ahcbp/index.html>.

5. More information about the Montana County History Initiative and the Dave Walter Fellowship can be found on the Research Center page of the Montana Historical Society website, [www.montanahistoricalsociety.org](http://www.montanahistoricalsociety.org).

### Are We There Yet?

1. Shirley A. Leckie and Nancy J. Parezo, eds., *Their Own Frontier: Women Intellectuals Re-Visioning the American West* (Lincoln, Nebr., 2008).

2. Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, eds., *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000* (Norman, Okla., 2003), quote p. 17.

3. Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *To Place Our Deeds: The African American Community in Richmond, California, 1910-1963* (Berkeley, Calif., 2000); Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Abiding Courage: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996).

4. Lynn Hudson, "Mining a Mythic Past: The History of Mary Ellen Pleasant," and Dee Garceau, "Finding Mary Fields: Race, Gender, and the Construction of Memory," in *Portraits of Women in the American West*, ed. Dee Garceau (New York, 2005).

5. Elizabeth Jameson and Sheila McManus, eds., *One Step over the Line: Toward a History of Women in the North American Wests* (Edmonton, Alberta, 2008).

6. "Introduction," in *Contact Zones: Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada's Colonial Past*, ed. Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale (Vancouver, B.C., 2005), 1; Jean Barman, "Aboriginal Women on the Streets of Victoria: Rethinking Transgressive Sexuality during the Colonial Encounter," *ibid.*, 205-27. See also Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham, N.C., 2006); and Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken History of the American West* (New York, 1988).

7. Laura E. Woodworth-Ney, *Women in the American West* (Santa Barbara, Calif., 2008); Sandra Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque, N.M., 1982).